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Test of secrecy

The case of Victor L. Marchetti, a former Central Intelligence Agency operative charged with violating his pledge of secrecy, is of particular interest because the outcome may have an impact on the entire question of governmental secrecy. A federal district court has enjoined Marchetti from revealing further information learned while he was with the CIA. If higher courts uphold this ruling, that might lead to the government's writing into many other employment contracts a secrecy pledge patterned after the CIA's.

By the same token, should the district court ruling be overturned the result might be to pry open the door that has thus far kept the CIA's operations almost totally secret from the public. Thus the Marchetti case can be seen to have far-reaching implications.

Both aspects of it alluded to above are of importance to the public. Secrecy in government is bad enough at present. Were the courts to rule in such a way as to permit the government to pledge a great many more persons to secrecy even after they leave government employ, that would be less likely to disclose information about the workings of government, lest they run the risk of legal action against them. This would not be in the public interest.

The opposite is true of an outcome that would make the CIA less a closed book to Congress and the public. Up to now it has been subjected to very little scrutiny, and very little control over how its big appropriation is spent. The public has a right to know more about such things.